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## Agency News

# TDCJ executive director anticipates upcoming 84th Texas Legislature

*Editor's note:* The 84th Texas Legislature convenes on Tuesday, January 13. TDCJ Executive Director Brad Livingston recently answered questions about the upcoming legislative session.

### *It has been reported that the state has a budget surplus. Is that true?*

The Texas economy has continued to grow during the last two years, to the point that state revenue has been greater than anticipated. Fiscal experts are predicting an unspent balance of at least several billion dollars by the end of the fiscal year. So in that sense there is a surplus, but with all the competing demands for state funds, the statutory limit on state spending and the high priority Texas policy makers place on controlling state spending, a surplus doesn't mean money won't be tight. I have no doubt the Legislature will continue to emphasize fiscal restraint during the appropriations process.

### *So what will be the agency's priorities during the appropriations process?*

The first priority is, of course, maintaining the "base" funding necessary to continue current operations, and even that requires

some additional funding. After that, we have identified a number of so-called exceptional items, the largest of which is a 10 percent pay increase for uniformed security staff and parole officers. That item alone would require an additional \$235 million during the FY 2016-17 biennium. Other priority funding requests involve offender health care, repair and rehab of existing facilities and expansion of various treatment and diversion programs. We also advocate for an across-the-board pay raise for all state employees as well as adequate funding for employee pensions and health insurance.

### *Do you think the Legislature will give TDCJ the additional funding we have requested?*

Regardless of the state's budget situation, no legislature could ever afford to give every agency all the funding they seek. As always, legislators will have to prioritize among the many competing demands for limited state resources.

### *You mentioned adequate funding for employee pensions. What is the status of the retirement fund?*

According to ERS (Employees Retirement System), the short term outlook is fine, but maintaining the fiscal soundness of the retirement program for the longer term requires further action. This agency strongly supports the ERS request for additional funding.

### *What other issues involving the agency will likely be considered during the upcoming legislative session?*

There won't be any Sunset legislation this time since we just went through that process last session. The Legislature has had success in shrinking the size of the inmate population through various means, to include expanding treatment and diversion programs, and I think you will see a continued emphasis on alternative sentencing for nonviolent

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offenders. In January the Legislative Budget Board (LBB) will release updated projections of offender population. While I anticipate their projections will show a relatively stable inmate population during the next five years, which is good compared to years past, policy-makers will consider ways to further reduce the number of incarcerated offenders.

### *Could that lead to more prison closings?*

It's hard to say, as it would depend on how much the population decreases, but with vacant positions and normal attrition there would be opportunities to mitigate the impact of any closures on our employees.

### *During the upcoming session, will the agency continue to provide updates regarding the budget process?*

As in past legislative session we will use the TDCJ website and employees' newsletter to keep employees informed of the legislation most directly impacting the agency and our workforce. We will, of course, closely monitor the appropriations bill, which determines the state's budget for the next two fiscal years.

### *Is there anything else you would like to add about the upcoming session?*

During my 10 years as executive director of TDCJ there have been five regular sessions of the Legislature, more if you count special sessions. During every session I am always struck by how many members take the time to express their deep respect and appreciation for TDCJ employees. I wish all our employees could hear it for themselves, but please know that in the Capitol you are recognized as dedicated public servants who are helping to keep Texans safe. Thank you. ●